

Cuba in Soviet Strategy

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by Zbigniew Brzezinski

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There would be no Berlin problem if the Soviet Union was a status quo power. It could then allow the reunification of Germany under explicit guarantees for Soviet security. But the Soviet Union is not a status quo power; it is a revolutionary one. Moreover, it is an increasingly self-confident revolutionary power. Precisely because of that it has been willing to run considerable risks to expel us from Berlin, and in this regard the Cuban case becomes both relevant and crucial.

From the Soviet point of view, the Cuban case has two dimensions: the long-range Communist dimension and the immediate Berlin dimension. Insofar as long-range considerations are concerned, the presence of Communism in Cuba undermines the American claim that the Western hemisphere is immune to Communist penetration and that the United States has the capability to exclude Communism from this hemisphere. It thus forces the United States to back down from a traditionally proclaimed position and imposes upon it a humiliation which is bound to have international implications. In addition, it creates within Cuba the economic, political and eventually the military bridgehead for further Communist expansion whenever the revolutionary situation matures elsewhere. To achieve these purposes primarily defensive weapons are initially sufficient.

In the Soviet calculations, however, Cuba has a special and immediate relevance to the Berlin problem, and it is this pertinence that made desirable the deployment of offensive weapons of mass destruction in Cuba. Several advantages pertinent to Berlin were to be attained by the operational positioning of such weapons:

1. An immediate strategic advantage was to be gained by exposing the US to IRBM's which inherently have greater reliability than more distant ICBM's. The warning time for the US in the event of attack would be significantly cut and the Soviets would no longer suffer the handicap of being distant from their targets while we are relatively close to ours.

2. The deployment was to attain a major psychological objective within the United States and within the West in general. It could have the effect of deterring counteraction in Berlin by stimulating widespread fear in the US, as well as creating the global impression that

a turning point in the balance of power between the West and the East has been crossed. It would thus directly challenge the relationship of force and will on which the Western position in Berlin rests.

3. It would increase credibility in the seriousness of the Soviet intent to back their Berlin actions with military might, since it would convey unmistakably the degree of risk-taking the USSR is willing to run.

4. It would create the basis for a possible "settlement" since at some future point the Soviet Union might have indicated its willingness to remove these weapons from Cuba in return for a so-called free city in Berlin and even the liquidation of American bases in the proximity of the Soviet frontier. This would have been a major success from the standpoint of the Soviets since the long-range political significance of the Castro regime would not be affected.

A bargain involving the eventual abandonment of Cuba altogether is in fact not possible and it is most unlikely that it was ever seriously considered by the Soviets. They surely realized that Castro would resist on his own. Furthermore, he could not be certain that the Soviets would in fact abandon him once we compromised on Berlin; and the Soviets could not be certain that we would compromise on Berlin if first we were allowed to liquidate Castro. Combining the two is simply not possible. Consequently the Soviet initiative in suddenly pouring offensive weapons into Cuba appears to have had a twofold intent: to improve the Soviet political bargaining position over Berlin and to improve, and perhaps even decisively alter, the strategic position of the Soviet Union in the event of a Berlin showdown. As their minimum objective, the Soviets hoped to exact major concessions in Berlin in return for some adjustments in Cuba; as their maximum, our backdown in Berlin, terrorized and deflected by the sudden revelation of a powerful nuclear threat from Cuba. The Soviets furthermore hoped to confront us eventually with a nuclear challenge by proxy, thereby again avoiding a direct confrontation but benefiting by the challenge.

The timing of the Soviet arms deliveries is a significant clue bearing out the foregoing analysis. The deliveries took place on a large scale in August and September, after the decision to force the Berlin crisis to a head had apparently been reached in Moscow. One may suspect that the Soviets expected that the installations would be completed by December and that the crisis

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